The Radical Ethics of Jesus. A Commentary on Feasibility

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Jesus Christ's message challenged the pervasive dogmatic legalism of his Zeitgeist and introduced a radical salvation-based ethics with clear eschatological themes. The following is an overview of some of the normative teachings espoused by Christ.

Love of God and love of fellow humans are paramount (Schnakenburg, 1965). The heart is the center of all moral life; a pure heart is the impetus for faith and for love. (Matt 6:24; Luke 6: 45). In order to love, the heart must be pure. Christ exemplified this theme by his unprecedented focus on forgiveness and mercy. He emphasized compassion for and acceptance of the disenfranchised - the marginalized of society. Moreover, he practiced and lived his teachings by loving and including all - the poor, the disabled, oppressed, condemned, ritually unclean - even the sinners and the outcasts who had been rejected by the pious, ritualistically-oriented establishment. His ethics required unfettered love for all, even enemies (Matt 5:43). These ethics are explicitly outlined in Christ's Sermon on the Mount (Matt. 5 -7; Luke 6:20-49).

Jesus opposed prejudice and appreciated the humble and those who suffer. His vociferous advocacy of altruistic self-sacrifice for and fellowship toward these groups introduced the ingredients for salvation or entry into the kingdom of God. According to Hans Kung (1999),

"Jesus wanted to announce in advance this kingdom, this rule, this will of God, with a view to human salvation. This alone made the criteria. So he called not only for the renewed observance of God's commandment but for love which in individual instances extends to unselfish service without hierarchy, to renunciation even without receiving anything in return, to boundless forgiving. It is love, which even includes the opponent, the enemy; love of God, and love of neighbor in accordance with the criterion of self-love" (p. 33).

Jesus Christ supported women and was keenly aware of their plight under the stronghold of patriarchy. He despised the double standard imposed upon them and was genuinely egalitarian. He advocated that women should hold spiritual roles and participate in the religious activities performed in the temples. His teachings violated the traditional political and religious patriarchal order and gender-guided roles of the time.

He vehemently rejected and challenged the legalistic and unreasonable requirements and conventional norms imposed by the Pharisees (Mk 12: 38-40) He rejected their hypocrisy and self-righteousness. These hyper-pious hierarchs exhibited a persona or veneer of legalism and divine righteousness, however, were morally hollow and greatly alienated from the Lord. These were morally impoverished oppressors who defied the will of God.

Christ expected all individuals not only to have an awareness of his moral prescriptions but to also apply them through actions and behaviors towards others. Those who do this will enter the Lord's kingdom. (Matt 7: 24 -27). We connect with Christ and his kingdom-we know him- through our actions.

According to Schnakenburg (1965), the Church indeed supports both the teachings of Christ and the moral prescriptions or obligations to act accordingly as a Christian. However, the Church teaches that one can successfully

accomplish this moral task only with Christ's grace and assistance.

I am fond of John Topel's (1998) statement:

> "The actions mandated by Jesus...enter into the limitlessness of human desire that is oriented toward the infinite love of God. Thus humans desire not merely material benefits, maintaining and ameliorating physical existence, but the whole range of actions which build a human community where the love of God is present and active, that is, the whole range of extraordinarily loving actions described in the Sermon on the Plain. In short, the Golden Rule opens human moral obligation to the deepest human thirst for God's self-giving love toward his creatures, far beyond the kinds of actions that can be mandated by any natural or positive law, or even by the divinely revealed Mosaic Law. It embodies the most radical altruism"(p. 477).

Christ's seemingly radical teachings are a prerequisite for salvation - and I firmly believe that they are realistic and practicable. The first step to incorporating them into our intra and interpersonal life is to consider how personally relevant (and profound) his teachings really are. They are not monumental or overwhelming expectations but accomplishable tenets of faith and salvation. By becoming mindful of these tenets, individuals can indeed modify their perceptions of the world and their behaviors. They can assimilate to these teachings and accommodate their behaviors to meet the demands of Christ. It does not take a great emotional or intellectual investment to be more a more loving, egalitarian, accepting, genuine, forgiving, and compassionate individual despite the current postmodern narcissistic social consciousness. Our current climate, which focuses on rugged individuality, competition, consumerism, and autonomy, may erect obstacles to being more altruistic and Christ-like.

Furthermore, many Christians are confused about the criteria for redemption and salvation. Is one saved by faith alone, or must one become an active agent in living out the moral maxims of Christ? How many Christians truly consider and weigh these maxims in their decision-making and relationships? How many view them as the chief ingredients necessary to know God and connect with God? These questions, I believe, may lead to a greater awareness of Christ's love. This awareness may be the impetus for authentic philosophical (theological) and behavioral change. This spiritual illumination may foster a willingness to transcend our selfish ego and genuinely accept the awe-inspiring mystery of God (Hick, 1995).

Has contemporary Christianity watered down Christ's teachings? I do not think they have been diluted; however, I do think that we often become inexorably bound to legalistic man-made dogmatic prescriptions that do not necessarily appear in the gospels or were not espoused by Christ himself. We fail to appreciate that Jesus' life (not dogma) is the moral compass of how we should live. Stanley Hauerwas (2001) writes: " Indeed, the very announcement of the reality of the kingdom, its presence, here and now, is embodied in his life. In him we see that living a life of forgiveness and peace is not an impossible ideal but an opportunity now present. Thus Jesus' life is now integral to the meaning, content, and possibility of the kingdom" (p. 117). We are theologically misguided if we judge, accuse, deceive, banish or cause enormous angst to individuals based on their sins. We are not practicing the moral maxims set forth by Christ. We lose the direction that he set forth for us. In essence we lose him as our Lord and myopically worship the agenda- based standards written by reactionary men. When our emphasis is on man-made moral codes rather than the words and examples set forth by Christ, I believe that we are embarking on a misguided path of moral impoverishment reminiscent of the Pharisees.

Sources

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